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ABSTRACT

A close reading of two nineteenth-century composition textbook prefaces reveals that teachers of that period attempted to rename and refocus the content and practice of composition to meet the imagined needs of real students, who were also frustrated and struggling. From the perspective of a twentieth-century composition teacher, William Swinton's "School Manual of English Composition" offers a constraining series of rigidly structured principles and assignments. A close reading of the preface, however, indicates that the author saw his textbook as different from traditional writing instruction. While the assignments in the book also seem overly restrictive, they offer the students the opportunity to write from the start instead of first learning the principles of rhetoric. George Quackenbos' "Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric: A Series of Practical Lessons" offers a clear representation of how nineteenth-century composition and rhetoric are imagined as "mental discipline." While Quackenbos aligns himself with the rhetorical tradition by gleaning material from textbooks regarded as standards, he resists traditional practice and offers students a set of guidelines for composition. Although the assignment language in the textbook sounds formal and stiff, it reveals a strategy for writing familiar to contemporary composition teachers. By not conflating the nineteenth- and twentieth-century positions into a generalized conception of composition, by allowing them to speak to and inform each other, composition teachers can form a renewed understanding and appreciation of their own work and the work of nineteenth-century students and teachers. (RS)

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CCCC - March 23, 1991
Speaking Copy

I need to begin my talk today by saying that I've changed my title and I'd like briefly to explain why. As I've worked on this project over the past year--doing archival work with nineteenth-century textbooks in the Nietz collection at the University of Pittsburgh and thinking about the types of things I'm noticing in these textbooks--I've found it both necessary and productive to stop and reflect on my work and how it's different from other historical projects in composition. As a result of that reflection, this paper is more focused on the second part of my program title--"Reading Pedagogy as a History of the Discipline"--in that it attempts to explain how I'm reading the pedagogical issues raised by these textbooks. And so I'd like to begin with the revised title of my paper . . .

Recovering the Work of Students and Teachers in Nineteenth-Century Composition Textbooks

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Recovering the Work of Students and Teachers in Nineteenth-Century Composition Textbooks

As a composition teacher and someone who assists in the training of composition teachers, I am concerned with issues of pedagogy: what the materials of a particular classroom are and how they are presented to students, the type of work students are expected to do in order to illustrate their learning, and how such work positions or names the students and teachers who engage in it. As I read nineteenth-century composition textbooks and the literature which investigates both them and the theories they represent, my response is a "teacherly" response. I am struck by the manner in which students and teachers appear (if they appear at all) as passive objects; people who are imposed upon and subjected to theories and

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practices; functionaries (if you will) who provide a means of talking about what might otherwise be a predominantly abstract subject. Attempting to see nineteenth-century students and teachers as active participants in the history of composition requires a reading that pushes against the grain of what existing historical work has taught us to notice--rhetoricians, theories, definitions, and models. Pushing against these powerful ways of seeing and naming in order to see nineteenth-century students and teachers is also difficult because all that a reader has of them is a textbook representation, in which they are closely intertwined with exercises on grammar, rules of style, and lessons on composing.

What I propose in this paper is a type of reading that draws the concerns of teachers and the activities of students away from the margins of nineteenth-century composition and more fully into its history. I want to stress the issue of difference, here. My work attempts to look at issues of nineteenth-century composition pedagogy which are not explored in other historical projects with the kind of attention I'm suggesting. As I read these textbooks, I see them as sites of on-going struggle by professionals in the field to imagine ways of talking about and teaching composition, and so my attention is drawn primarily to those places where students and teachers are most likely to be represented: in prefaces, notes to teachers (which are generally interspersed between lessons and exercises), and assignment language directed to students. By working closely with these materials, I'm trying to imagine how they re-open existing historical discussion in unexpected ways. Since the purpose of my talk is to demonstrate a particular way of reading that pays attention to students and teachers, I have limited my material, here, to the prefaces of two textbooks (one a college text the other a high school text) and one assignment from each.

Although a shortage of well-trained teachers may have motivated the production of numerous textbooks, a close reading of textbook prefaces reveals that teachers themselves didn't imagine classroom problems only in those terms. Frustration with and concern for poor pedagogical practice was also a motivating force behind textbook production. It is in the prefaces to these books that I first recognized the presence of teachers attempting to re-name and re-focus the content and practice of composition in order to meet the imagined needs of real students, who were also frustrated and struggling. In the opening paragraph of the preface A School Manual of English Composition, William Swinton's purpose for producing his textbook is clearly based on what he sees as a pedagogical problem: teaching principles of rhetoric as a prerequisite to composing. In his claim that "[p]upils must *first be taught how to write at all*, before they can be shown how to write *well*," Swinton positions himself against the predominant practice of delaying the act of composing until after the student has "mastered the complicated details of rhetorical theory." He does not, however, distance himself from the belief that teaching rhetorical principles is a significant component of learning to compose. What is different about his program of "language-training" (as he calls it) is that it co-ordinates the act of composing (learning how to write) with the "development of rules and principles" (learning to write well). By imagining the act of composing as part of how one learns to compose, Swinton suggests that "language-training" entails a specific type of work with pencil and paper. Learning rhetorical principles is imagined as important, but not as an end in itself or as the means by which one learns to compose; his aim is to offer a particular type of "school-work" that "give[s] school-children between the ages of twelve and sixteen a fair mastery of the art of writing good English, for the ordinary uses of life." This

way of imagining the work of the classroom shifts the priorities from abstractions of "theory and mysteries of style" to the activity of composing--actually getting words on paper.

The progressive structure of Swinton's textbook allows me to see it as an aid to struggling students as well as to struggling teachers--either those who are ill-trained or those who are frustrated by their students' inability to produce good writing from a study of principles. The way in which subject matter is arranged from chapter to chapter (and even within chapters) offers teachers a type of guideline for the school term's work as well as charts the kinds of work students will do. The first five chapters of the book are devoted to learning how to write sentences while learning the principles that govern them. Basic concepts of sentence level style are addressed in chapter six. And in chapter seven, students move on to the more complex task of studying and composing compositions and themes. The book ends with a chapter on prosody and versification. If I were to focus my attention only on the table of contents of this textbook, it would be easy for me to dismiss it as just another example of nineteenth-century composition as a mental discipline--that is, composition as a series of concepts to be learned from the most basic to the most complex. From my perspective as a twentieth-century composition teacher, Swinton's textbook appears to offer a constraining series of rigidly structured principles and assignments. A close reading of the preface, however, alerts me to the fact that this author saw his textbook as somehow different from what was traditionally offered in the teaching of writing. My challenge as a reader of this book, then, is to attempt to read it for what is alternative about it. What does it have to offer on its terms, rather than on the terms that my own experience and values as a composition teacher immediately imagine it?

To illustrate this reading against the grain of my own understanding of what good composition is, I want to consider three composition assignments that appear early in Swinton's textbook. At first glance, all three of these outlines seem constraining. Not only do they provide the subject for each essay, they also provide the type of information each essay should include and in what order it should appear. As one of my colleagues noted when he first saw this particular page, he could imagine a nineteenth-century teacher yelling at a student and cracking her with a ruler if she didn't adhere to each point in those outlines. That certainly is one way to imagine these assignments, but one that is confined by the notion that the nineteenth-century teacher was someone overly concerned with discipline and hardly invested in the actual practice of teaching. Rather than assuming that I know this context because I possess a general store of knowledge about the nineteenth century or because I've read Berlin or Connors or Crowley, I have attempted to imagine myself backwards into this context where a different set of values and way of seeing and speaking are at play. I know from the preface that Swinton saw his book as representative of a particular type of "remodelling" taking place in public schools. Since the purpose of the textbook is to offer an alternative, more productive approach to composition, then I have to read the assignments for what I do not readily recognize as productive from my twentieth century perspective. By asking students to write as they study general principles of rhetoric, Swinton is pushing against the tradition represented by a text like Lindley Murray's grammar--the tradition of writing as a mental discipline--the belief that knowledge, once learned, automatically translates into the ability to write. Swinton's argument is that one does not learn to write without writing. And so his assignments offer students the opportunity to write--right from the

start, as well as offers guidelines (like these three outlines) for how one might engage in this activity. Although my experience as a composition teacher has taught me how such pedagogy places certain restraints on student writing, within the nineteenth-century context, I can also see how, at a time when teachers were attempting to imagine composition as something more than just learning principles of rhetoric, this textbook offered students and teachers a way of transforming the abstractions of rhetoric into a particular type of classroom work and way of talking about the act of composing. From this perspective I can begin to see how these outlines, with their pre-set topics and appropriate content and organization might have been imagined as liberatory and productive. They leave no question about how one brings a particular set of information together in something called a composition, and that--to them--was an improvement on what had gone before.

George Quackenbos' textbook Advanced Course of Composition and Rhetoric: A Series of Practical Lessons offers a clear representation of how nineteenth-century composition and rhetoric are imagined as "mental discipline." The first five parts (or the first 325 pages) of his book are dedicated to an examination of words, a history of the language, arrangement of thought, and effective expression. In short, Quackenbos makes the move one comes to expect in the nineteenth century; he offers 325 pages of what he imagines as prerequisite knowledge for composing. In his preface he writes: "such previous instruction having been given, and such aids being presented . . . the process of composing, no longer a dull, routine, performance, becomes a highly intelligent and improving mental discipline." So it's not just twentieth century readers who name composition in the nineteenth century a mental discipline, but nineteenth century teachers

themselves. My reading of Quackenbos could stop here with what I could call "proof" of how composition is imagined in nineteenth-century terms, but what I need to ask myself at this point is this question: Is what Quackenbos means by "mental discipline" the same thing that I understand it to be? In order to answer that question, I need to pay attention to how the preface and assignment language imagines the student's work and the teacher's role.

Although Quackenbos' eight page preface is far more content-oriented in that he devotes seven pages to describing the content of the book, the last page (page 8) discusses the purpose of the book in terms of students, teachers, and pedagogy. While he aligns himself with rhetorical tradition by gleaning material from textbooks regarded as standards (such as Blair, Burke, and Alison) for inclusion and further amplification in his book, he also acknowledges that he is doing something quite different in his book. He's resisting the traditional practice of having students "prepare written exercises from given subjects without aid or instruction of any kind" by offering a set of guidelines for how one composes. In an attempt to deflect the criticism he anticipates from professionals who espouse the more traditional approach, Quackenbos justifies his pedagogy by drawing a parallel between the work of industry and the work of the student. He describes how the success of industry is directly related to a "definite enlightened system" which regulates the worker's labor and time. Likewise, students who "pursue a well-digested plan, matured by experience, and elaborated by careful thought [will certainly accomplish more than those] directed by no higher principle than chance." While the first seven pages of this preface lead me to read "mental discipline" as only the mental activity of studying concepts (which I've come to anticipate in a book like this), this last page indicates that Quackenbos also imagined that teachers could teach

students a "plan" or a "system" of doing work. And while I know that plans and systems can also be considered a type of mental discipline (in that they entail learning how to structure a hierarchy of thoughts), Quackenbos identifies aids and instructions for composing as one of the book's characteristics which distinguishes it from other textbooks. He imagines students doing a particular type of writing work, not just thought, as they learn the principles of rhetoric.

In part six of the textbook called "Prose Composition," one can easily see how Quackenbos maintains the nineteenth-century practice of presenting the subject of rhetoric as a course of study. At the bottom of every page there is a set of recitation type questions about the text, and in this particular text (once owned by a Charles Pillsbury of Concord, NH), the most frequent marginal note is the word "learn" written next to sections that have been blocked off by the student. So I have no doubt that learning the content of this book was important to the people who used it. If, however, I pay attention to the specific assignment language in this composition chapter, I can also read how these concepts represent a certain type of work that isn't purely mental, but the kind that gets done with pencil and paper.

Quackenbos concludes a discussion of the writing process in chapter 6 with a summary of a three step process that, when looked at by itself, sounds more abstract or mental than it actually is. It was this list that stopped me as I was skimming this section of the book. Yes, the emphasis is on the mental discipline of examining a topic and the terminology is certainly abstract, but what I was interested in was how this three step process actually translated into a type of work that students could do and that a class could discuss. And so I backed up a few pages to read the instructional language, which revealed that this process is comprised of six

specific activities. First, the student must think "careful, deliberate, concentrated thought[s]" about her chosen subject. Second, she must make a list of main ideas about the subject. Third, she arranges these ideas in "proper" order which is illustrated by the model. Fourth, she revises her analysis paying particular attention to unity and structure. Fifth, she amplifies this outline into a written composition that weaves ideas together and provides elaboration. And she concludes with a careful revision focusing on issues of correctness. At first glance, this process doesn't appear grounded in a particular set of skills--especially that first step about careful thought. It seems to assume that writing takes place on a conceptual level. The steps that follow, however, bring the process into the material world of actually producing words on paper. Even though this assignment language sounds formal and stiff and the process seems too rigid to allow students to do much within it, it does reveal a strategy for writing that begins to sound familiar to contemporary composition teachers. While I can see the restrictions and limitations in this assignment, I can't ignore the fact that it <u>does</u> offer students more than just principles to learn and apply to models in the book or to automatically use in a composition. It (like Swinton's book) also lays out a plan by which students and teachers can chart a particular kind of work as they move from thought to a finished composition.

Although my attention in this paper is directed toward issues of nineteenth-century composition and pedagogy--issues that appear both distant and different from my work as a twentieth-century teacher, I value my work with these books for how it directly informs and leads me back to considerations of my own teaching practices and values. For it is my twentieth-century way of imagining <u>what</u> composition is, <u>how</u> I teach it, and <u>why</u> I value it that influences how I read textbooks from a by-gone century.

If my initial response to exercises like those on the handout is something like: "Gee, not only are these restrictive, but assignments like this produce bad writing," what does that response tell me about how I imagine composition? What values about teaching do I reveal? What does it indicate about my own teaching practices? This type of self-reflexive reading leads me to an understanding of how my own position hinders me from seeing--and, thus, valuing--the work of nineteenth-century students and teachers. At the same time, it also allows me to read more openly because I'm aware of two sets of terms at work--two ways of imagining composition--that meet when a twentieth-century teacher reads a nineteenth-century textbook. By not conflating these two positions into a generalized conception of composition, by allowing them to speak to and inform each other, I'm lead to a renewed understanding and appreciation of both my work and the work of those nineteenth-century students and teachers.